Journal of Education and Learning; Vol. 12, No. 6; 2023
ISSN 1927-5250 E-ISSN 1927-5269
Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education

Unveiling the Impact of Journal Writing on EFL Teachers' Professional Growth

Fatoon Simbawa[1] & Hussein Assalahi[1]

[1] English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Fatoon Simbawa, English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Received: August 30, 2023 Accepted: October 20, 2023 Online Published: November 1, 2023

doi:10.5539/jel.v12n6p177 URL: https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v12n6p177

Abstract

This study aimed to explore and document language teachers' beliefs and perceptions of journal writing as a tool for improving their practice and enhancing their professional growth. The significance of reflective journals in improving professional practice has been widely reported in pre-service teacher education research. However, research on in-service English as a foreign language teachers' perceptions of teaching journals has yielded competing views, and it remains an underexplored area. Prompted by this, a qualitative research design was adopted to document language instructors' perceptions of and experiences using teaching journals in their daily lives. Four female English language teachers from the English Language Institute (ELI) at a university in Saudi Arabia participated in a two-week journal writing intervention to reflect on and document their experiences. The findings drawn from the focus-group interviews revealed that the participants had both positive and negative experiences with teaching journals but, for the most part, found journal writing to be a valuable tool for reflecting on their teaching and enhancing their professional growth. Additionally, the participants reported some challenges encountered in integrating journal writing, including lack of time, miscommunication with superiors, lack of motivation, and heavy workload. The study also discusses recommendations for using journals for classroom practitioners and professional development researchers.

Keywords: reflection, journals, professional development, ELT, TESOL, teachers' beliefs, teachers' perceptions, journal writing, reflective writing

1. Introduction

Reflective journal writing, also known as teaching journal writing, is receiving increasing attention in discussions about promoting teachers' professional growth. Reflective Journal writing is rooted in reflective practice, which broadly refers to the processes teachers undertake to collect and scrutinize data about their teaching practices and critically analyze their beliefs and assumptions, as well as the implications these beliefs and assumptions hold for their practice and overall professional development (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Farrell, 2004). Despite the lack of consensus on what reflection means, it has been widely accepted as being integral to the continuous professional development of English language teachers (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017). Richards (1990, p. 5) suggests that it "helps teachers move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking." Similarly, Burns (2010) posits that reflection empowers teachers to improve their teaching, deepen their subject knowledge, and enhance their decision-making processes. Geringer (2003) highlights the need for reflective practice to respond to the extensive demands of teaching in the 21st century. Drawing on Dewey's (1933) and Schon's (1983) seminal works on reflection, TESOL theorists (e.g., Farrell, 2007, 2018; Pennington, 1992; Richards, 1990) offered key insights into how reflective practice shapes the knowledge of English language teachers. The bulk of previous research has investigated the perceptions of pre-service teachers on the impact of reflection on their practice. However, in the context of this study, pre-service teachers' perceptions have produced contradictory results. The term 'reflection' itself is considered ambiguous and open to interpretation. As Loughran (2002) suggests, it "means everything to everyone and has lost its ability to be seen" (p. 33). Reflection has also been viewed negatively as it lacks a clear structure for implementation, and teachers and schools need to create opportunities and contexts in which it can be supported. In addition, it is claimed that reflective practice is generally seen as a Western value (e.g., Zeichner & Liu, 2010) and, specifically—in the

Arab world—may cause tensions with cultural norms and values and "may hinder [teachers'] learning processes" (Richardson, 2004, p. 429). Several writers on this topic, however, reported the positive perceptions of pre-service teachers on reflection despite the prevalence of concurrent misconceptions (Alsuhaibani, 2019; Clarke & Otaky, 2006). While some studies have investigated the views of in-service teachers on reflective practice (A'Dhahab, 2009; Fakazli & Gnen, 2017), reflection remains a relatively underexplored topic among EFL teachers. More importantly, the perceptions of language instructors on teaching journals and their implications for their professional learning journey and real classroom settings remain unclear. This research, therefore, aimed to provide insights into teachers' understanding of the concept of reflection. Additionally, having joined a training program on implementing reflection through a teaching journal, the study sought to report on how language instructors implement it in practice and the challenges they encounter.

1.1 Problem of the Study

While reflective journal writing has been a longstanding practice in the daily lives of teachers in different parts of the world, the professional development of teachers in the context of this study is characterized as being driven by others rather than the teachers themselves. In addition, there is little to no mention of reflective practices, and teachers rarely carry out journaling as a means of professional growth (Opell & Aldridge, 2015; Richardson, 2004). Moreover, there is an ongoing debate around the ambiguity of integrating reflection to enhance language teaching. As Farrell and Kennedy (2019) point out, what constitutes reflection and how it "should be operationalized" is unclear. This study, therefore, aims to unpack this ambiguity and explore and document the beliefs and perceptions of teachers on journal writing as a reflective tool for enhancing teachers' professional growth. To do this, it aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the English language instructors' perceptions of and experiences with the use of teaching journal writing (TJ) as a tool for improving teaching and enhancing their professional growth?

RQ2: What are the reported challenges of integrating teaching journals into the daily lives of English language instructors?

2. Reflection Framework

Reflection has evolved in mainstream teacher education as a response to the technical-rational model or the behaviorist view of teachers' knowledge base (Farrell, 2018). From this perspective, the teacher is seen as a passive recipient of knowledge transmitted to them by experienced others, and teaching is viewed as a dissemination of discrete behaviors and a demonstration of a set of transferrable competencies. In contrast, and with the rise of the sociocultural turn in language teacher education (Freeman & Johnson, 2005; Lantolf & Johnson, 2007), teacher knowledge is understood to be dialogic, dynamic, and shaped by the social world in which teachers work. Reflective writing, thus, can be "a dialogue between teachers as writers and their thoughts on their teaching practice" for subsequent mediation (Burton, 2005). As Johnson (2006) indicates, this knowledge is "normative and lifelong, as emerging out of and through experiences in social contexts: as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and later as teachers in the settings where they work" (p. 239). Reflection is hailed as an intervention that helps teachers bridge the gaps between their initial teacher education, personal histories, and biographies (Reeves, 2009), the realities of language classroom settings, and their assumptions and dispositions about teaching. As Lantolf and Johnson (2007) observe, "L2 teachers typically enter the profession with largely unarticulated, yet deeply ingrained, everyday concepts about language, language learning, and language teaching that are based on their own L2 instructional histories and lived experiences" (p. 884). Undertaking reflection thus allows teachers to create continuity between newer and past experiences, allowing for professional development and a greater sense of self-awareness.

Dewey (1933) identified four elements to consider when conducting reflection. First, reflection allows a learner to connect different experiences through relationships in a meaning-making process that leads to deeper understanding. Second, reflection is rooted in scientific inquiry, which requires a systematic and disciplined strategy for thinking. Third, reflection requires community, and therefore, the thoughts and opinions of others are essential. Finally, for reflection to be positive, an individual must value their own personal and intellectual growth. Schön (1983) posits that to develop as reflective practitioners, teachers need to engage in two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The former denotes careful observation and analysis of teachers' practices while they carry out their professional duties, while the latter pertains to critical scrutiny after the duties have been performed. The ultimate goal of both actions is to assess the beliefs and practices of teachers and seek ways to enhance their professional practice. Informed by these initial premises, more research has been conducted on the topic of reflective inquiry in TESOL. Farrell's (2013) seminal work suggests that

reflective inquiry allows for informed decision-making to occur and leads to enhanced teacher confidence and reduced burnout. As Pennington (1992, p. 51) also indicates, reflection "develop[s] confident and self-motivated teachers and learners."

2.1 Undertaking Teaching Journals

Several activities facilitate reflective practice. These can take the form of verbal discussions or written documentaries and include teaching journals, critical friends, teacher development groups, classroom observations, and action research (Farrell, 2018). According to Lee (2008), "Teachers utilize teaching journals to record their reactions to or questions about a teaching incident and reflect on what they know, observe, discuss, and read to improve their teaching practice" (p. 119). Maintaining a teaching journal, also known as a reflective journal, to facilitate teachers' reflection on their work has been a longstanding practice in self-initiated professional development of teachers (Farrell, 2018). Gilmore (1996) defines reflective journals as personal exercises in which educators record their thoughts, views, beliefs, and emotions in different documents. Farrell (2018) adds that writing regularly in teaching journals can be one of the purposes of these journal entries to develop teachers' self-awareness, help them visualize their beliefs and practices, and plan their professional learning to improve their practice.

Spalding and Wilson (2002) explain that journals serve as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences. They can establish and maintain relationships with instructors, express personal concerns and frustrations, and facilitate internal dialogue. They also suggest that journals provide teachers with three benefits: they provide a window into the thinking and learning of students, help establish and maintain relationships with students, and serve as dialogical teaching aids (p. 1396). Ho and Richards (1993) assert that journal writing provides teachers with an opportunity to describe and examine their teaching practices. As Boud (2001) stated, journal writing can be used as a tool for self-expression, as a record of events, or as a therapeutic method. Additionally, Lee (2007) reported that dialogue and response journals allowed pre-service teachers to engage in reflective thinking, and nearly all of them valued the experience of journal writing. Among other things, reflective journal writing can aid teachers in recognizing their weaknesses, seeking improvements, and connecting their existing knowledge with new information (Daloglu, 2001; Lee, 2007; Richards & Ho, 1998; Yost et al., 2000).

Researchers have also reported on some of the difficulties and limitations associated with journal writing, including its limited contribution to teachers' achievement of higher levels of reflection (Galvez-Martin et al., 1998), teachers' failure to distinguish telling from reflecting (Krol, 1996) and their inability to move beyond immediate concerns about classroom management and control (McLaughlin & Hanifin, 1994). Several of the above findings came from journal analysis. Conversely, the literature review conducted for this study revealed only a few published reports on how teachers perceive their experiences with the journal-writing process, revealing the complexity of this research process.

3. Previous Studies on Journal-Writing

The bulk of previous research in the context of this study was conducted on the perceptions of pre-service teachers about journal writing (e.g., Alsuaibani, 2019; Richardson, 2004; Clark & Otaky, 2006). Farrell and Kennedy (2019) indicate that little research investigated the views and experiences of in-service teachers about reflective practice. While four studies investigated in-service teachers' views on reflective practice, little research provides insights into the perceptions and experiences of in-service teachers on journal writing as a reflective tool for continuous professional development in the context of higher education in Saudi Arabia. Sibahi (2016) conducted qualitative research to explore the perceptions of four college EFL language teachers in Saudi Arabia on reflective practice. She found out that all the participants had positive perceptions of reflective practice and viewed it as a tool for self-appraisal to improve their practice and attain their professional development goals. However, while the participants mentioned journals, notes, discussions with colleagues, and action research as forms of reflective practice, the extent to which they used these tools is unclear. As Sibahi indicated, some of the participants never systematically experienced reflective practice. The findings also suggest that lack of training and institutional support hindered reflective practice. Similarly, Oksana et al. (2022) revealed that while in-service language teachers in Ukraine use reflection as a tool to improve their teaching, they "apply reflective practice consistently but not systematically in their teaching" (p.188). This finding is corroborated by teachers' preference for informal reflective practice strategies over formal ones. For instance, among the 65 teachers interviewed in the study, (e) journaling (3.5%) and action research (3.5%) were the least used reflective practice tools. In contrast, their students' feedback (70%) and peer-sharing (63%) had the highest occurrence among the participants. The findings also revealed several barriers to enacting systematic reflective practice, including lack of professional development, heavy workload, lack of time, and lack of incentives.

Farrell and Kennedy (2019) study reported on one teacher's reflective journey through Farrell's (2015) framework for reflecting on practice. Data was collected through interviews, classroom audio-recordings, and written reflections. They argue that using this framework attained systematic reflection and that the teacher's reflections on his philosophical standpoints derive from his classroom-based decisions. Hence, teaching journals can reveal teachers' deeply held assumptions about their teaching and how these inform what they do in the classroom. While some incidents show how the teacher utilized "curiosity to provide new experiences" for his students (p. 10), it falls short of how reflection promotes teachers' professional development.

The findings drawn from previous research highlight that in-service teachers perceive reflective practice positively, although they do not employ systematic approaches to reflection. In addition, it reveals several challenges that teachers face daily in their performance of workplace reflective practice. Critical among these is the lack of time and workplace professional development to enhance teachers' professional practice through reflection. However, despite these valuable contributions from this research, there remains a dearth of research into in-service teachers' accounts of their experiences with journaling as a way of documenting their reflections and enhancing their professional growth and the associated challenges.

4. Methodology

In line with calls to conduct classroom-centred research (Allwright, 1983; Numrich, 1996; Palmer,1992), this study employed a case study design in order to explore in-service teachers' perceptions of and experiences with journal writing and its perceived impact on teaching and professional development. Case studies are qualitative in nature and provide multiple perspectives on the phenomena in question (Crotty, 1998).

4.1 Instruments

The main instruments used in this study were reflective journal writing and subsequent focus-group interviews. Journal studies, also known as diary studies, provide introspective accounts of language research (Nunan, 1992). In addition, McDonough and McDonough (1997) contend that diaries enhance systematic inquiry into one's professional practice in pursuit of change and development. Semi-structured interviews are also utilized in this study to obtain deeper insights into teachers' use of journals in their teaching (Crotty, 1998). These instruments were chosen to offer the research participants a bottom-up approach to documenting their perceptions and experiences using journal writing. In other words, reflective journal writing provides the participants with the opportunity to freely document their reactions to classroom incidents as they emerge, which may have been otherwise overlooked (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). The focus-group interviews, on the other hand, can be considered as an "oral recall" and "conversation" (Farrell, 2006) between the participants and the researchers to gain insights into how the participants reflected on their teaching in the reflective journals. A reflective journal template was shared with the participants, and they were required to submit a reflective journal for two teaching sessions. The reflective journal template included the three stages of reflection: reflection-for-action, in-action, and on-action. To ensure the effective implementation of this tool for documenting reflective practice, this study comprised the first phase of an online training session on how to integrate e-journal writing to stimulate reflective practice. The purpose of this session was to raise teachers' awareness of journal writing and guide them on how to use journals to reflect on their teaching and ongoing professional development. In the second phase, the participants were engaged in mock journal writing, using the provided journal template to reflect on their practice. A total of eight e-journals were collected for data analysis. The participants then discussed and reflected on their experiences with journal writing during an online focus-group interview conducted through a Skype conference call.

4.2 Participants

The participants in this study comprised four female English language teachers employed at a language institute at a university in Saudi Arabia (ELI). The purposive snowballing sampling approach was used to identify and recruit participants in the study based on their availability and willingness to use journal writing as a reflective practice to enhance their teaching and professional development. The initial participant selection process commenced with one participant who was a student teacher in an MA program, and then referral to other participants was sought. Table 1 below shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants of the study

Participants	Nationality	Experience	Qualification
Participant 1	Saudi	Nine years as an EFL teacher	MA in TESOL
Participant 2	Saudi	11 years as an EFL teacher	MA in ELT
Participant 3	Indian	Ten years as an EFL teacher	MA in English Literature and Language
Participant 4	Saudi	Eight years as an EFL teacher	MA in TESOL

4.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis comprised two phases of reflective journals, which were thematically analyzed by "identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within" teachers' journals (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The emergent themes (Table 1) were then peer-checked with the participants and used as priori for generating initial codes within the transcribed focus-group interviews. Two overarching themes were drawn from the focus-group interview, which revealed teachers' experiences with journal writing and the challenges in conducting it.

5. Findings

This section presents the analysis of the findings drawn from the participants' reflective journals and the focus-group interviews. Table 2 shows a summary of the themes of the journal entries. It indicates that the participants used the journals to record their thoughts on classroom-related issues for subsequent critical analyses. All participants highlighted challenges to journal writing and reflective teaching methods, while two teachers analyzed students' behaviors and teaching beliefs.

Table 2. Content of the teaching journals

Theme	Example	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Student behavior/motivation	Low motivation	X	X	X	X
	Less interest in self-study	X	X	X	X
	Less participation in class	X	X	X	X
	Communicative approach (language is best integrated into communicative activities)	X	X	X	X
Beliefs about teaching/learning	Autonomous language learning	X	X	X	X
	Happy moments in teaching	X	X	X	
	Teaching language is fun.	X	X	X	X
	Reflection and Learning	X	X	X	X
Joy of Teaching	Sharing with colleagues	X	X	X	X
Professional learning	I experiment with what we discussed with colleagues	X	X	X	
Challenges to journal writing	Teaching is demanding.	X	X	X	
	Heavy workload	X	X	X	
	No time for reflection				

These entries provided input for the focus-group interviews. The participants were asked about their perceptions of journal writing and its implications for improving their teaching and continuous learning. The following themes were drawn from the focus-group interview.

6. Focus-Group Data Analysis

This section presents the findings of the focus-group session. The participants were asked a total of eleven questions about journal log writing and reflection in the semi-structured interview, and further questions were asked to develop the conversation where necessary. The participants drew on their past experiences with journal writing (institutional PD requirement) and voluntary journal writing in the intervention study. While teachers' experiences with journal writing in the workplace can be described as positive overall, the participants revealed fluctuating attitudes toward journal writing. These experiences can be categorized into positive and negative views towards journal writing. Based on the negative and positive experiences of the participants, they mentioned several challenges that may hinder the leveraging of journaling as a means to attain professional learning outcomes. These challenges include the overwhelming task of carrying out journal writing, undervalued practice, unheard voices, and frustrations during journal writing. The findings are summarised as follows:

6.1 Negative Experiences with Journal Writing

The participants perceived negative experiences with JW about its mandatory nature, feelings of guilt and blame, and the evaluative purposes of journal writing.

6.1.1 Top-down Journal Writing

The participants mentioned that as part of their professional development duties, they must submit a reflective journal towards the end of the academic year. They reported receiving instructions at the beginning of the year to complete a reflective log about their teaching and their student's learning. This reflective log is shared via an online drive (Google Drive), where teachers can access it through Google Docs. This requirement appears to create a conflict for teachers between their perception of why they want to do journal writing and the institutional requirements to do so. As Participant 1 said, "I always feel bad … when I fill out the Google form. It's for the ELI, and it's more of like a whole module reflection." This view of journal writing raised a number of concerns about the extent to which it leads to professional development. Participant 2, for instance, explains that putting the journal writing task toward the end of the module seems meaningless to her. As (2) asked, "What types of development that you want to do or make out of a course report, which kind of gives you this feeling of reflection on a modular basis." (Participant 2). The participants also seem to dislike the focus of journal writing on issues related to students' learning at the expense of institutional support to address this. Participant 4 highlights that course reports where they provide reflections "are long and demanding, each semester we write some recommendations that we think will improve students' levels or when it comes to grade distribution, but nothing has changed at all." Similarly, participant (3) views course reports as a tool to identify only some aspects of students' performance. As she said, "Course reports are an overview of exactly how the students performed the portions like they did well and something that they did not do well. So it was kind of known, disintegrating the whole course into parts to identify the stronger and the weaker parts." (Participant 3).

6.1.2 Boring Journal Writing

The feeling of boredom towards top-down workplace journaling can also be attributed to compliance with the institutional requirement to complete the end-of-semester course report. The participants shared the same perceptions of finding the course report boring, demanding, and time-consuming. Participant 1 voiced negative experiences with institutional journal writing (google form) due to the fact that it is imposed and required for evaluative purposes. She said, "Reflection here is boring; it is summative and does not give the teacher the freedom to reflect." Moreover, Participant 2 stressed the monotonous work of reflection required in the course report that does not seem to provide opportunities for reflection on professional practice. Instead, as she emphasized, "It's very boring, and I feel the information in the course report should be collected from the admins. It's not the work of the teachers." In addition, she explained that they were asked to justify some points in the course report, and she would answer them, "I don't have any justification other than there are problems in the students' study skills or their negligence." In addition, the feeling of boredom appears to stem from the recurring content in the Google form that the participants repeatedly encounter. As Participant 4 explains, "We do it every semester; I feel like I am repeating everything over and over again."

6.1.3 Feeling of helplessness

The participant's compliance to complete the end-of-semester course report seems to have emotional repercussions as well. That is, reflection appears to be meaningless to teachers as they do it for others rather than for themselves. It seems that it is in this type of context that teachers' self-morale is impacted, and concepts like failure, helplessness, and guilt appear to emerge. Participant 1 mentioned how, due to this, she felt helpless and unable to do anything to help her students address their challenges. She said, "Maybe that was because I haven't practiced with her [student] a lot, or she deserved a C or D because she never attended.". In addition, top-down journaling seems to induce self-blame among the participants as they are required to justify why learning problems or issues mentioned in the journal remain unresolved. It appears that the participants understand this as pointing out their weaknesses rather than tackling classroom-based learning issues and, therefore, results in self-blame. Participant 2 refers to the unpleasantness of having one's mistakes pointed out through top-down journaling. As she said, "What I feel is …when you are given a journal [from] the institution, you fear judgment because …you don't want to show people you don't know closely your weaknesses. Because everything is not always okay during the classroom. Sometimes things are good, and Sometimes they're not so pleasant". Participant 3 concurs that self-blame and fear from being judged for reflecting their weakness emerge in the post-observation journaling. As she indicated, "Sometimes we have formal observations. They [observers] ask us to write reflections, you know, but we don't want to show this in the reflection because we are fearing of being judged." The feeling of helplessness also applies to teachers engaging in top-down PD. That is, teachers are

required to attend a certain number of workshops in each module to address learning issues, but they soon realize that these sessions are theoretical and far from practical. This situation seems to create tensions for teachers as they feel guilty about just attending workshops without gaining hands-on experience in implementing the acquired knowledge in practice to improve language learning. Participant 4 complained about online training sessions during the Covid-19 pandemic, "So obviously you have to attend whether you like it, or you don't want to whether they're relevant or non-relevant and you log into them, and you are just doing some stuff, not really paying attention when it's online. And besides, it's not very relevant the majority of the time… I feel guilty … because we must complete that quota of workshops by the third module" (Participant 4).

6.2 Progressive Journal Writing

The positive experience of teachers with journaling can be attributed to the self-initiated nature of journal writing implemented in this intervention. Teachers are satisfied with this type of teaching journal since it allows them to gain deeper insights into their pedagogical decision-making processes and align their professional practice with best practices in the field. The professional growth achieved from journal writing was also one critical dimension that teachers highlighted in focus-group interview.

6.2.1 Positive Experiences with Journal Writing

The participants were optimistic about the teaching journal implemented in this study as it encourages self-initiated reflections to improve their professional practice. It seems that the participants utilized the teaching journal to reflect on classroom-related issues as they emerged and after they occurred in order to address these issues morally and professionally. Participant 3 advocates the value of journal writing as a professional activity and emphasizes that it compensates for weak memory by allowing her to document her practice and retain information. She said, “It’s really easy to get information and talk about it when you have already seen it when you write down something. I don’t trust my memory at all for anything, so I have to write; I write down even the smallest things” (Participant 3). Participant 1 mentioned that the teaching journal helped her unpack the recurring problems related to classroom management that were noted down in previous observations. She found the journal helpful when managing a mixed-ability class, as it allowed her to see where she made mistakes. “It [Teaching Journal] was really helpful. After I submitted my reflections, I reflected some more. I can see the way I manage things, and there is, of course, room for better development. You see where you messed up. And you see where you've done good” (Participant 1). Participant 2 also found the teaching journal helpful, especially in raising her awareness about her strength and how she enhanced her practice. She said, “It helped a lot in raising my awareness as a teacher, how I tackle this particular issue or how, for example, I focused on a strength and developed it.” The participants also found teaching journals useful for early-career teachers as they are constantly reminded about recurring classroom problems. For some teachers, the journal seems to be essential and fundamental in shaping their identities as a teacher. Participant 3 indicated, “As a new teacher, it was very helpful. I can see my progress, and I believe that it was an essential part in shaping my personality in shaping my teaching skills.” Participant 3 also elaborates that journaling allows her to recall past teaching/learning issues and address these more professionally.

“I had to, like flip through a bit to think about which one [issue] do I need to mention. Which one do I need to talk about exactly? Or what exactly should I tell you about? So that’s just a bit of flipping through, and it did help. Every time you go back to your journal or you go back to your memories, you always pull out something which was unusual or that you can do better. So, I think that was helpful that way”. (Participant 1)

She also adds how reflection is good for self-improvement and the venting process and how it yields positive results. “Journal per se is good for your reflection for your self-improvement or venting out whatever you want to call it the positive outcome of reflection.” (Participant 1).

6.2.2 Changes in Beliefs

The participants reported that the teaching journal was seen as a valuable tool to probe into their profoundly helped assumptions about how they view and carry out their teaching. Participant 1 said, “Keeping a teaching journal has been a valuable tool for my professional growth. It has helped me to reflect on my practice and identify areas for improvement, and it changed how I share my ideas with others.” Additionally, she clarifies how journaling made her open to sharing her thoughts and experiences with others, and also how it helped her bond with other teachers and relate better to her teaching experiences.” I used to see no point in sharing thoughts and venting to other teachers. I kept it all to myself. But, journaling has helped me open up even to other colleagues who share the same experience. Now, I often write about new teaching strategies that I am trying or about challenges that I am facing. This has helped me to bond with other teachers and learn from their experiences, too.” Participant 2 notes that it helped her recognize some areas, such as her emotions and beliefs.

"It enabled me to identify areas of improvement and also made me recognize my emotions, values, and beliefs that influence my everyday practice." In addition, participant 3 mentions how journaling made her develop and strengthen her belief system. As she said, "It just made my beliefs stronger that when you do good, it comes back to you. And when you are genuine, things will work out. So, because I honestly genuinely love doing what I was doing" (Participant 3). In the same vein, Participant 4 stated that her beliefs changed and that she would like to share her reflections with colleagues." These reflections could be shared with other colleagues. And it makes me feel comfortable and focused during the classroom and ready for any anticipated problems."

6.2.3 Changes in Practice

Most participants consider changes in their cognitions about how to teach as synonymous with changes in practice. In light of their reflections in the teaching journal, the professional practice is aligned with their informed belief about teaching. Participant 1 deemed her change as subtle but evolved out of critical analysis of her teaching. She said, "I believe that the change is very subtle that you don't notice it, but you notice it as you go" (Participant 1). Participant 2 contends that change in practice is synonymous with learning from practice, which was noticeable due to her reflections, considering the knowledge gained in her postgraduate studies. She said, "Because of my master's, I'm implementing what I'm studying right now into my classes. So I found it [Teaching Journal] helpful as I became more aware. The master experience was different. It built me differently [was transformative], and I learned a lot, and I think I'm progressing; I'm learning as a teacher. I think I'm getting better, and I'll try to get better in the future. I think teachers, in general, cannot stop progressing, learning, and evolving" (participant 2). Reflective practice seems to catalyze change in gaining and boosting confidence. Participant 3 indicates that writing the journal boosts her confidence and reminds her that she can do better. She said, "After you reflect, I think it improves your confidence level. Because you know that you have done this, been there, done that you can do better. So I think it just boosts your confidence when you go through your reflections." (Participant 3). Participant 4 also witnessed a significant transformation in her teaching methods, and due to proactive, pre-class reflections, she concluded that effective classroom interventions must be contextually grounded, considering factors like class level, age, and proficiency. She said, "Before you go to class to your class, you have anticipated problems, and you know you will find solutions, but sometimes these solutions cannot be applied. It depends on the student's level. It depends on your class. Depends on their participation with you. So, each class will be different. So, after each reflection, you will find out that these solutions are not applicable to each class. So, of course, each time you learn something new" (Participant 4).

6.3 Challenges with Journal Writing

A highly recurrent theme that emerged in the data pertains to workplace challenges that discourage journal writing. These challenges concern the overwhelming task of journal writing, heavy workload, and lack of intuitional support. Participant 1 said, "I really want to do journaling, but sometimes it's hard to keep up with your busy life and Your house. It's time-consuming sometimes". Relying on one's memory to recall critical incidents impedes critical reflection. Participant 4 notes that she does not have trouble remembering what happens in class; hence, writing these issues seems redundant. She said, "I have a good memory, so I believe that whatever happens in the classroom, I remember everything. So, I believe for me, I don't have to write any reflection" (Participant 4). Participant 2 mentions a lack of time coupled with a heavy workload as a deterrent to ongoing reflections. "I'm too busy studying for my MA and working as an academic coordinator, and it involves lots of time and effort. maybe that is what set me back from sitting down, taking the time to write and reflect upon my teaching." Furthermore, Participant 3 highlights the hindrances to ongoing reflective inquiry posed by her workload. As she said, "All the tasks assigned to me were according to my caliber, and basically, I did teaching and monitoring for the exam, proctoring for the exam and grading. So I suppose all of, all of that was part of the package. It was not overwhelming at times. It could be tiring but not overwhelming."

Lack of institutional support seems to be another challenge that surfaced in the data. That is, teachers who engage in reflective practice and subsequently recommend pedagogical interventions often find their input undervalued and disregarded. As Participant 3 said, "We discussed how the curriculum should go about and if we had any issues and all. But, of course, they were never taken into consideration. So, what I feel the senior management maybe once in a while could have a genuine conversation or a meeting with a group of staffs to hear them out directly". Participant 1 concurs and adds, "Whether for the institution or myself what discourages me from writing journals is frustration because as a teacher, I am angry at not being able to make my own decisions in class. So, when I write journals, I see some mistakes that I've done or my students did or the atmosphere of them being very bored".

7. Discussion

The participating teachers noted the benefits of self-initiated journal writing in identifying their strengths and weaknesses and pursuing change in light of this reflective process. Their strategies for achieving this goal involve personal reflection in-action and on-action and seeking collegial support and peer discussions. The findings also suggest that the participants reported negative experiences with top-down journaling writing, perceived as lacking professional merits and rewards. This is a highly recurring theme in the broader literature on reflective journals (Mesa, 2018) and coincides with previous research which indicated the positive (e.g., Farrell & Kennedy, 2018; Sibahi, 2016) and negative (e.g., Zeichner & Liu, 2010) perceptions of journal writing among ELT. Similarly, Oksana et al. (2022) advocate the use of reflective journals for language teachers in order to create conditions for teachers' ongoing professional learning. However, unlike previous research findings which highlight superficial reflection amongst language teachers (Oksana et al., 2022; Farrell & Kennedy, 2018; Sibahi, 2016), this study suggests that teachers' reflective practice has been instrumental in facilitating an in-depth and critical evaluation of their teaching practices. This finding aligns with Zeichner's (1992) view about the importance of reflection in developing effective teaching. The most beneficial use of writing a reflective journal was reported when teachers returned to an issue over a period of time in a conscious effort to improve it. When writing the journal, there was a high degree of satisfaction expressed by teachers when they found that that level of consistency and persistence resulted in improvements in their teaching in relation to the specific issue they had previously identified. The findings also underscore the advantages of Schön's (1987) reflective practice framework to explore how teachers implement reflection in and on action and the complex processes involved in self-assessment and professional learning. This is evident in the reported changes observed in practice due to reflection, a continuous and iterative process that allows the practitioner to take corrective action when necessary (Boyd, 2001).

In addition, all teachers noted various challenges to sustainable journal writing that must be addressed. One of the key challenges was lack of time, with some teachers mentioning the commitments already involved in completing their Master's studies. This is in line with the findings of previous investigations. Oksana et al. (2022), for example, note that many of the teachers involved in their research found it very challenging to find time to complete their journal entries regardless of the professional benefits they might gain from the experience. In addition, other barriers pertain to the institutions and educational systems. Lack of training on reflective practice in the context of this study was also an issue for teachers in Saudi Arabia (Sibahi, 2016) and other contexts (Oksana et al., 2022). It is therefore suggested that if reflective practice is to be nurtured, attention to these challenges is of paramount importance. These include the allocation of time for reflection, organizational support, and the provision of professional development programs to enhance reflective practice (Mann & Walsh, 2017). However, these challenges do not seem to suggest that reflective practice is viewed in a negative light by Saudi teachers due to cultural or Western values, as suggested by Richardson (2004).

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that journal writing has a positive impact on teaching and the professional growth of teachers. It motivates teachers, boosts their confidence, helps them scrutinize their professional practice, discuss their concerns with their colleagues, and learns from their practice. However, teachers' negative experiences with journal writing emerge due to lack of time, heavy workload, miscommunication with superiors, and lack of motivation. While the findings suggest that teachers find journal writing a tool to promote learning from practice, systematic attempts at continuous professional learning were lacking. Richards (2015) suggests that teachers should take advantage of journal writing to promote their professional learning and enhance their professional growth. While the qualitative research design reported in this study utilized triangulation of data to provide valuable insights into teachers' perceptions of journal writing, the aim was to provide deeper and context-specific understanding rather than generalize the data to other contexts. Additional mixed-methods research is recommended to investigate how journal writing can be effectively employed as a source of professional development for teachers.

References

A'Dhahab, S. M. (2009). *EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding reflective writing: Researching English language teaching and teacher development in Oman* (pp. 1–15). Ministry of Education, Muscat, Oman.

Aberdeen, T. (2011). Doing Action Research in Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners. *The Canadian Journal of Action Research, 12*(1), 45. https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v12i1.5

Allwright, D. (1983). Classroom‐centered research on language teaching and learning: A brief historical

overview. *Tesol Quarterly*, *17*(2), 191–204. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586649

Alsuhaibani, Z. (2020). Perceptions and practices of EFL pre-service teachers about reflective teaching. *Arab World English Journal*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3512561

Bordonaro, K., & Richardson, G. (2004). Scaffolding and reflection in course-integrated library instruction. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *30*(5), 391–401. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2004.06.004

Boud, D. (2001). Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2001*(90), 9–18. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.16

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burton, J. (2005). The Importance of Teachers Writing on TESOL. *Tesl-Ej*, *9*(2).

Cirocki, A., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2017). Reflective practice for the professional development of TESOL practitioners. *The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL*, *6*(2), 5–24. Retrieved from http://www.reflectiveinquiry.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/RP-special.pdf

Clarke, M., & Otaky, D. (2006). Reflection 'on' and 'in' teacher education in the United Arab Emirates. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *26*(1), 111–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.07.018

Crotty M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Daloglu, A. (2001). Fostering reflective teaching from the start: Journal keeping in preservice teacher education. *Journal Writing*, 87–100.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process.* Boston: D.C. Heath.

Farrell, T. S. (2003). *Reflective practice in action: 80 reflection breaks for busy teachers*. Corwin Press.

Farrell, T. S. (2006). Reflective practice in action: A case study of a writing teacher's reflections on practice. *TESL Canada Journal*, 77–90. https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v23i2.56

Farrell, T. S. (2013). *Reflective Practice for Language Teachers*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137317193_3

Farrell, T. S. (2015). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Farrell, T. S. (2018). Reflective practice for language teachers. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp. 1–6). John Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0873

Farrell, T. S., & Kennedy, B. (2019). Reflective practice framework for TESOL teachers: One teacher's reflective journey. *Reflective Practice*, *20*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1539657

Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (2005). Toward linking teacher knowledge and student learning. *Second Language Teacher Education: International Perspectives*, 73–95.

Galvez-Martin, M. E., Bowman, C. L., & Morrison, M. A. (1998). An exploratory study of the level of reflection attained by preservice teachers. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, *11*(2), 3.

Geringer, J. (2003). Reflections on professional development: Toward high-quality teaching and learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *84*(5), 373–380. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170308400510

Gilmore, F. (1996). *Qualitative research: Written journals within teacher training*. Unpublished manuscript. Christchurch College of Education. Christchurch, New Zealand.

Ho, B., & Richards, J. C. (1993). Reflective thinking through teacher journal writing: Myths and realities. *Perspectives*, *5*(2), 25–40.

Johnson, K. E. (2006). The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*(1), 235–257. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264518

Kharlay, O., Wei, W., & Philips, J. (2022). How do I teach? Exploring knowledge of reflective practice among in-service EFL teachers in Ukraine. *Teachers and Teaching*, *28*(2), 188–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2062709

Krol, C. A. (1996). *Preservice Teacher Education Students' Dialogue Journals: What Characterizes Students'*

Reflective Writing and a Teacher's Comments.

Lantolf, J. P., & Johnson, K. E. (2007). Extending Firth and Wagner's (1997) ontological perspective to L2 classroom praxis and teacher education. *The Modern Language Journal*, *91*, 877–892. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00675.x

Lee, I. (2007). Preparing pre-service English teachers for reflective practice. *ELT Journal*, *61*(4), 321–329. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccm022

Lee, I. (2008). Fostering preservice reflection through response journals. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *35*(1), 117–139.

Loughran, J. J. (2002). Effective reflective practice: In search of meaning in learning about teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *53*(1), 33–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053001004

Mann, S., & Walsh, S. (2017). *Reflective practice in English language teaching: Research-based principles and practices*. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315733395

McDonough, S., & McDonough, S. (1997). Research methods as part of English language teacher education. *English Language Teacher Education and Development*, *3*(1), 84–96.

McLaughlin, D., & Hanifin, P. (1994). *Empowering the Novice: Promoting Reflection in Preservice Teacher Education*.

Numrich, C. (1996). On becoming a language teacher: Insights from diary studies. *Tesol Quarterly*, *30*(1), 131–153. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587610

Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Olaya Mesa, M. L. (2018). Reflective teaching: An approach to enrich the English teaching professional practice. *How*, *25*(2), 149–170. https://doi.org/10.19183/how.25.2.386

Osei-Kofi, N., Richards, S. L., & Smith, D. G. (2004). Inclusion, reflection, and the politics of knowledge: On working toward the realization of inclusive classroom environments. In *Transforming the first-year experience for students of color* (pp. 55–66).

Palmer, C. H. (1992). Diaries for Self‐assessment and INSET Programme Evaluation. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *15*(3), 227–238. https://doi.org/10.1080/0261976920150307

Pennington, M. C. (1992). Reflecting on teaching and learning: A developmental focus for the second language classroom. In *Perspectives on second language teacher education* (pp. 47–65).

Pennington, M. C. (1995). The teacher change cycle. *Tesol Quarterly*, *29*(4), 705–731. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588171

Reeves, J. (2009). A sociocultural perspective on ESOL teachers' linguistic knowledge for teaching. *Linguistics and Education*, *20*(2), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2008.11.001

Richards, J. C. (1990). *The language teaching matrix*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667152

Richards, J. C. (2015). *Key issues in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024600

Richards, J. C., & Ho, B.(1998). Reflective thinking through journal writing. In J. C. Richards (Ed.), *Beyond training* (pp. 153–179). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667169

Richardson, P. M. (2004). Possible influences of Arabic-Islamic culture on the reflective practices proposed for an education degree at the Higher Colleges of Technology in the United Arab Emirates. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *24*(4), 429–436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2004.02.003

Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practicioner: How professionals think in action* (p. 1983). New York: Basic Books.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. Jossey-Bass.

Sibahi, R. (2016). Exploring reflective practice among college EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. *Arab World English Journal*, *6*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2834402

Spalding, E., & Wilson, A. (2002). Demystifying reflection: A study of pedagogical strategies that encourage reflective journal writing. *Teachers College Record, 104*(7), 1393–1421. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810210400704

Von OPPELL, M., & Aldridge, J. (2015). Teacher beliefs and education reform in Abu Dhabi: 21st Century Skills? *Muğla Sıtkı Koçman Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi, 2*(2), 36–60. https://doi.org/10.21666/mskuefd.31152

Yost, D. S., Sentner, S. M., & Forlenza-Bailey, A. (2000). An examination of the construct of critical reflection: Implications for teacher education programming in the 21st century. *Journal of Teacher Education, 51*(1), 39–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/002248710005100105

Zeichner, K. (1992). Rethinking the practicum in the professional development school partnership. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *43*(4), 296–307. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487192043004009

Zeichner, K., & Liu, Y. (2010). A critical analysis of reflection as a goal for teacher education. In N. Lyons (Ed.), *Handbook of reflective inquiry* (pp. 67–84). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-85744-2_4